

Station Name: Southeast Louisiana Refuges/Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge

Date Established: August 22, 1984

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities: 15,220 acres

(1) Public Law 98-396

Purposes For Which the Refuge Was Established:

- (1) to provide for the conservation and management of fish and wildlife within the refuge;
- (2) to fulfill the international treaty obligations of the United States with respect to fish and wildlife; and
- (3) to provide opportunities for scientific research, environmental education, and fish and wildlife-oriented recreation, including hunting, fishing, and trapping, bird watching, nature photography, and others.

Refuge Objectives:

- (1) to manage the refuge in a manner that will preserve the natural state of the floodway system consistent with the public harvest of the surplus wildlife resources and protection of rare and endangered species;
- (2) to manipulate the habitat to maintain existing wildlife populations at or near carrying capacity;
- (3) to provide overwintering refuge areas for waterfowl;
- (4) to provide areas for quality observation of wildlife in their native habitats;
- (5) to provide demonstration areas for exhibition of sound habitat and wildlife management practices;
- (6) to provide the maximum amount of public outdoor recreational opportunities including hunting and fishing without damage to the resources and to provide access for this use; and
- (7) to provide opportunities for environmental education by serving as an outdoor laboratory for universities, colleges, public and private schools, and individuals studying the ecology of bottomland hardwood ecosystems.

Other Applicable Laws, Regulations, and Policies:

1. Antiquities Act of 1906 (34 Stat. 225).
2. Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 (15 U.S.C. 703-711; 40 Stat. 755).
3. Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929 (16 U.S.C. 715r; 45 Stat. 1222).
4. Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act of 1934 (16 U.S.C. 718-178h; 48 Stat. 451).
5. Criminal Code Provisions of 1940 (18 U.S.C. 41).
6. Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (16 U.S.C. 668-668d; 54 Stat. 250).

7. Refuge Trespass Act of June 25, 1948 (18 U.S.C. 41; 62 Stat. 686).
8. Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. 742a-742j; 70 Stat. 1119).
9. Refuge Recreation Act of 1962 (16 U.S.C. 460k-460k-4; 76 Stat. 653).
10. Wilderness Act (16 U.S.C. 1131; 78 Stat. 890).
11. Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965.
12. National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (16 U.S.C. 470, et seq.; 80 Stat. 915).
13. National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (16 U.S.C. 668dd, 668ee; 80 Stat. 927)
14. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, NEPA (42 U.S.C. 4321, et seq.; 83 Stat. 852).
15. Use of Off-Road vehicles on Public Lands (Executive Order 11644, as amended by Executive Order 10989).
16. Endangered Species Act of 1973 (16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq.; 87 Stat. 884)
17. Refuge Revenue Sharing Act of 1935, as amended in 1978 (16 U.S.C. 715s; 92 Stat. 1319).
18. National Wildlife Refuge Regulations for the Most Recent Fiscal Year (50 CFR Subchapter C; 43 CFR 3101.3-3).
19. Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986 (S.B. 740).
20. North American Wetlands Conservation Act of 1990.
21. Food Security Act (Farm Bill) of 1990 as amended (HR 2100).
22. The Property Clause of The U.S. Constitution Article IV 3, Clause 2.
23. The Commerce Clause of The U.S. Constitution Article 1, Section 8.

Description of Use:

The proposal will allow regulated sport hunting of selected migratory birds, big game, and upland small game species in accordance with State and Federal regulations and objectives.

Anticipated Biological Impacts of the Use:

Anticipated biological impacts of this use are that resident and migratory game animals will be harvested at levels sufficient to provide the maximum recreational use and still maintain healthy, viable wildlife populations and habitats. In this manner, renewable wildlife resources would be utilized to the benefit of the public, and yet have no detrimental effects on the resources or their habitats.

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

Sport hunting on the Atchafalaya NWR would be in accordance with State, Federal, and special refuge regulations, and FWS policy and directives. In general, State regulations will provide the guidelines for wildlife harvests. Special refuge regulations may be more restrictive than State regulations as deemed necessary to meet refuge objectives.

Time and space scheduling and/or zoning may be initiated if situations warrant such action to buffer conflicting refuge uses, reduce safety hazards, or limit wildlife harvest. A permit system will be used for the harvest of either-sex deer, trapping, and special seasons for the handicapped. Permits will be issued by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) fee free. For other hunting activities, it is not anticipated a permit system will be needed. Refuge

regulations will be enforced.

Justification:

Surveys and evaluations of the wildlife species and their habitats completed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and LDWF on Atchafalaya NWR indicate populations sufficient to support public hunting. The hunting program is in compliance with the purpose for which the refuge was established.

NEPA Compliance:

Categorical Exclusion _____

Environmental Assessment XX

Environmental Impact Statement _____

FONSI XX

Determination: (Check One)

Refuge Recreation Act Compliance: (Determination of Funding) NA

Refuge Manager: _____

Date: 6/27/79

Reviewed by: _____

Date: _____

Date: _____

UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE


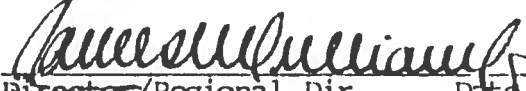
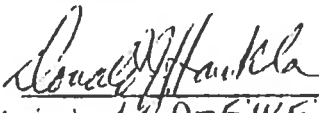
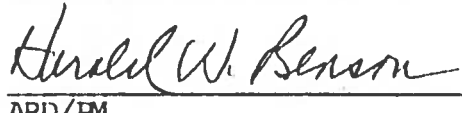

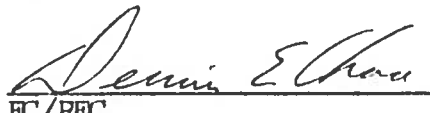
ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION MEMORANDUM

Within the spirit and intent of the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other statutes, orders, and policies that protect fish and wildlife resources, I have established the following administrative record and have determined that the action of: Opening Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge to Sport Hunting

- _____ is a categorical exclusion as provided by 516 DM 6 Appendix 1. No further documentation will be made.
- x _____ is found not to have significant environmental effects as determined by the attached Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact.
- _____ is found to have special environmental conditions as described in the attached Environmental Assessment. The attached Finding of No Significant Impact will not be final nor any actions taken pending a 30-day period for public review [40 CFR 1501.4(e)(2)].
- _____ is found to have significant effects, and therefore a "Notice of Intent" will be published in the Federal Register to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement before the project is considered further.
- _____ is denied because of environmental damage, Service policy, or mandate.
- _____ is an emergency situation. Only those actions necessary to control the immediate impacts of the emergency will be taken. Other related actions remain subject to NEPA review.

Other supporting documents:

Hunt Plan (attached)
Compatibility Statement (attached)
Public Law 98-548 (on file RO and Refuges office)

		
Initiator	Date 1/20/87	Director/Regional Dir. Date 01/26/87
		
acting ARD-FWE	Date 1/23/87	ARD/PM Date 1/20/87
		
	Date 1-26-87	EC/REC Date 1/23/87
		_____ Date _____

Sport Hunting Decision Document Package for

Atchafalaya NWR



Contents

1. Hunting Plan
2. EA/FONSI
3. Section 7 Evaluation
4. Compatibility Statement
5. Letter of concurrence
6. Refuge-Specific Regulations

Sport Hunting Decision Document Package for

Atchafalaya NWR



Contents

1. Hunting Plan

HUNTING PLAN

ATCHAFALAYA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

DECEMBER 1986

Approved


Regional Director

Date

01/26/87

ATCHAFALAYA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE HUNT PLAN

I. Introduction

A. Location and Physical Characteristics

Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is located in south-central Louisiana, Iberville and St. Martin Parishes. More specifically, it is situated within the East Atchafalaya Floodway between U. S. Highway 190 on the north and Interstate Highway 10 on the south. The area is accessible via State Highway 975 which intersects I-10 at the Butte La Rose Exit, and U. S. 190 east of Krotz Springs. ANWR is bordered on the west by the Sherburne Wildlife Management Area, on the north by agricultural land, east and south by private holdings in bottomland hardwoods. Substantial private holdings interrupt the continuity of ANWR system. The refuge is subject to annual inundation in winter and early spring due to backwater from the Atchafalaya River as it overtops the natural river levee to the south and backs up as sheet water and/or in channels up the natural tributaries which bisect the area (Bayou de Glaise, Bayou Burron, Big Alabama, Little Alabama, Bayou Johnson). More pronounced headwater flooding would occur when the Morganza Control Structure at Highway 1 would be open for flood control. During summer and early fall, water levels on the refuge are influenced primarily by rainfall within the levee system originating near Simmsport. The flow is generally north to south via manmade canals, Black Bayou, Bayou Close, Bayou Stiff, Big Alabama Bayou, Bayou de Glaise, and Bayou Burron.

The present refuge consists of 15,255 acres of bottomland hardwoods and associated wetlands. Approximately 500 acres are presently under cultivation and planted in soybean, corn and wheat.

The topography of this refuge generally varies from 15 to 20 feet above mean sea level. The greatest variation in elevation occurs along Big Alabama Bayou where the elevation is highest at topbank to depressed slough where elevations may be as low as 15 feet. Topography is typical of the major floodplains, with channel meanders and natural levees, lakes, swamps, and bayous providing slight local relief.

South-central Louisiana climate is basic to the coastal climate, due primarily to its southerly latitude and proximity to the Gulf of Mexico. Summer months are characterized by rather uniformly warm and humid conditions. Climatic conditions during the winter months are more variable due to periodic colder continental air masses pushing down through the area.

Annual rainfall generally exceeds 60 inches. Snowfall is relatively rare and accumulations are virtually non-existent. Mean

annual freeze-free period extends for approximately 270 days (early March - late November).

The Refuge within the Atchafalaya Floodway has remained largely unsettled. Some petroleum extracting and storage facilities do exist, as did several camp structures which were occupied primarily during hunting season.

Approximately 500 acres of agriculturally developed land is presently under cultivation on the extreme north boundary of the refuge. Prior to acquisition, the subject area had been leased to private hunting clubs. Primary seasonal uses of the area have included hunting, fishing, crawfishing, trapping, camping, logging, mineral exploration and production, with some land clearing and farming.

B. Habitat and Wildlife

The upper reaches of the Atchafalaya Basin offers a great diversity of wildlife habitat. Habitats can be broadly classified as mid to late successional bottomland hardwood forests, cypress forest mixed with bottomland hardwoods, open water, and agricultural lands. Tree species within the bottomland hardwood forest vary according to the wetness of the specific site. Common species on the higher, well-drained sites include red oak, hackberry, sweetgum, and elm. The wetter, lower sites contain predominantly cypress, willow, and ash. Other common species found in association within these forest types include red maple, cottonwood, sycamore, locust, boxelder, and bitter pecan. Recent inventories reveal that except for the lowest swampy areas in the Bayou des Glaisses area, merchantable stands exist throughout most of the forested portion of the refuge (14,455 acres). Sawtimbers (14" DBH and greater) volumes exceed 2.3 MBF per acre, with cypress, ash, willow, red oak, and sweetgum exhibiting highest volumes in descending order.

The basin has historically provided habitat for a wide diversity of wildlife species. Major migratory species that use the basin include such waterfowl as wood ducks, mallards, wigeon, teal, and gadwall. These species utilize the seasonally flooded bottomland hardwood forests and open water areas. The wooded swamp areas are prime wood duck production areas.

Several rookery areas for wading birds exist within the refuge area. Various species of herons, egrets, ibises, and anhingas utilize these rookeries during breeding season. Large numbers of woodcock winter on the area.

Common resident game species found on the refuge include the white-tailed deer, wild turkey, gray and fox squirrels, and swamp rabbit. Other common mammals occurring in the area include black bear, bobcats, coyotes, otters, red and gray fox, nutria, muskrat, mink, raccoons, and opossum. Many species of amphibians and reptiles

are also found. High alligator populations are found in areas which hold permanent water. The red swamp crawfish, ^{and} as well as finfish, populate the area.

There are several federally-listed endangered species whose historic range includes the areas encompassed by the refuge. These include the bald eagle, and Florida panther. Permanent water areas serve as home for the American alligator, Bachman's warbler and the Arctic peregrine falcon may possibly occupy the refuge on a seasonal basis.

The proposal to preserve a segment of the Atchafalaya Basin would insure that a unique and nationally significant wildlife ecosystem would be preserved for future generations.

C. Refuge Development

The Atchafalaya NWR was established by Public Law 98-548. The first acquisition (15,255 acres) was initiated on August 8, 1986, utilizing FY-84 Supplemental Appropriations Act (August 1984) funds (\$11,065,618).

The newly established refuge will be managed by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries consistent with specific language in the authorizing legislation under cooperative agreement. Game Division personnel, LDWF, District VI, Opelousas, will assume management responsibilities.

Currently, there is one improved public road providing access to the acquired property which is owned by the State of Louisiana. A series of unimproved roads and trails also exist on the refuge. An old greentree reservoir is present on the east bank of Big Alabama Bayou. Sixty hunting camps are present on the refuge, all are targeted for removal before the first scheduled hunting season.

Proposed refuge development will include boundary painting and posting, access road improvement and maintenance, erecting entrance signs, rehabilitating the existing greentree reservoir, revegetating agricultural land when taken out of cultivation.

II. Conformance with Statutory Authorities

The refuge was established October 26, 1984 by Public Law 98-548 of the U. S. Congress for the following purposes: (1) To provide for conservation and management of all fish and wildlife within the refuge. (2) To fulfill the international treaty obligations of the United States with respect to fish and wildlife. (3) To provide opportunities for scientific research, environmental education, and fish and wildlife oriented recreation, including hunting, fishing and trapping, bird watching, nature photography and others.

Migratory and resident game species present on the refuge are in numbers deemed by the Service to be large enough to support public hunting. Seasons, bag limits and hunting methods will generally be the same as those which apply to the state's wildlife management areas.

This use is compatible. Although hunting and trapping are stated purposes for which the refuge was established, they do have the potential for conflicting with other purposes. Over use can reduce wildlife populations below levels that the habitat can efficiently support. Species of special concern can be denied habitat during critical times, or individuals may be indiscriminately killed. Use by hunters and trappers may interfere with other public use activities under which the refuge was also established to serve.

The application of sound wildlife management techniques based on reliable up to date information will balance wildlife harvests with populations refuge habitat can efficiently support. Portions of the refuge may not be open to hunting of certain species (waterfowl for example) in order to maintain or increase optimum populations.

Knowledge about the numbers, habitat requirements, and seasons of use are necessary to adequately protect endangered and threatened species. At the present time the American alligator is the only animal in this category known to exist on the refuge. Other species are thought to be occasional visitors. Alligators are abundant enough to warrant a limited harvest. Provisions to protect other species must await their discovery.

Conflicts between the people of various user groups will be eliminated through time and space zoning.

Funds and manpower required to operate the hunting program will be provided by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

III. Statement of Objectives

The initial management objectives of the refuge will be guided by policies and objectives of the NWR system, USFWS, and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries which emphasizes the following primary goals:

1. Preservation of part of the Atchafalaya Basin to insure that a unique and nationally significant wildlife ecosystem would be preserved for future generations.
2. Preservation and enhancement of endangered species and their critical habitat.
3. Preservation and enhancement of waterfowl habitat in bottomland hardwoods.
4. Provide a variety of high quality wildlife-oriented recreational opportunities consistent with the refuge system objectives and traditional uses where compatible with refuge objectives.
5. Provide optimum environmental and ecological research opportunities.

6. Provide opportunities for interpretation and environmental education.

The proposal will allow regulated sport hunting of selected migratory birds, big game, and upland small game species in accordance with state and federal regulations and objectives.

Seasons, areas open to hunting, and harvests will be determined annually and published in the Code of Federal Regulations under Special Regulation (50 CFR 32), and the LDWF's Hunting and Fishing Regulations approved by the Commission. If any areas are to be closed to hunting, they will be designated by written instruction and/or signing.

Public use information, needed for program evaluation will be provided through various methods.

Time and space scheduling and/or zoning may be initiated if situations warrant such action to buffer conflicting refuge uses, reduce safety hazards, or limit wildlife harvest. A permit system will be used for the harvest of either-sex deer, trapping, and special seasons for the handicapped. Permits will be issued by the LDWF fee free. For other hunting activities, it is not anticipated a permit system will be needed.

IV. Assessment

A. Wildlife Populations

Atchafalaya Refuge is located within the northeast area of the Atchafalaya Basin Floodway System in Iberville and St. Martin Parishes, Louisiana. The Basin is in the south central part of the state.

Wildlife populations are as follows:

1. Endangered Species and Species of Special Concern

Three federally listed endangered species and two threatened species may utilize the refuge for year-round or migration habitat. These are: Bald Eagle (E), Eskimo curlew (E), Arctic peregrine falcon (T), Bachman's warbler (E), and the American alligator (T - threatened by similarity of appearance). The Atchafalaya River may be within the range of the Florida panther (E) and the Red wolf (E). There are continued reports of sightings of Ivory-billed woodpeckers (E) in the upper 1/3rd of the Atchafalaya Basin. Alligators are relatively abundant on the refuge and the habitat available is probably supporting near maximum numbers.

2. Migratory Birds

Atchafalaya NWR provides excellent habitat for resident wood ducks as well as other migratory waterfowl. Although wood

ducks and mallards constitute the majority of the waterfowl on this area, many other species such as gadwall, green-winged teal and pintail can be found. The Atchafalaya Basin is a major wintering area for woodcock in the United States. Other migratory game birds using the refuge in smaller numbers are snipe, rails and mourning doves. Thousands of passerine birds use the area, some are year-round residents, while others migrate.

3. Big Game

White-tailed deer, wild turkey and black bear are present on the refuge. The turkey flock has expanded its geographic range to include the northern third of the Basin since its reintroduction in the mid-1960's. Deer exist in numbers estimated to be one or more per 20 - 30 acres, and are exceeding the carrying capacity for refuge habitat. A few native Louisiana black bears were known to occur in the lower Atchafalaya Basin in the early 1960's. In the mid-1960's, the State introduced 130 bears into the northern part of the Basin in Pointe Coupee Parish. Although many of these wandered widely, some remained and have reproduced. The refuge is included in their range.

4. Upland/Small Game

The resident, upland/small game species present on the refuge include gray and fox squirrels, swamp and cottontail rabbits. Quail populations because of limited habitat are low, but the other mentioned species are abundant. Squirrel habitat within the Basin is considered to be the best in Louisiana and possibly the best in the Nation.

5. Fur Animals

Commercially-important furbearing animals have been harvested from refuge lands for many years. Those species present are: mink, muskrat, nutria, river otter, bobcat, red and gray foxes, striped skunk, beaver, raccoon, opossum and coyote. All species except red fox, striped skunk and coyote are abundant on the refuge.

6. Other Wildlife

Overall, the refuge supports a vast array of mammalian, avian, reptilian and amphibian wildlife either as residents or during annual migration.

B. Species Competition

White-tailed deer exist on the refuge in numbers larger than the habitat can efficiently support. Their numbers are to be reduced through hunting to bring the population more in line with the carrying capacity.

C. Predation by Target Species on Other Wildlife

The refuge supports a large breeding population of wood ducks which are preyed upon by raccoons, also abundant here. It is not known how much raccoons are limiting wood duck production, however, it is considered to be a significant problem.

V. Description of Hunting Program

Specific refuge regulations will be addressed under special hunting regulations published annually. Only regulations considered essential for the protection of the fish and wildlife resource and public visitors will be included.

A. Migratory Birds

1. Administration

Atchafalaya NWR will be opened to migratory bird hunting as per CFR Title 50. Species which may be hunted will be published annually in the special hunting regulations.

2. Data

An estimated 8,000 - 10,000 waterfowl may overwinter on the refuge during some years. Primary concentrations are in flooded timber, the des Ourses Swamp, and adjacent flooded agricultural fields. Wood ducks and mallards constitute approximately 80% of the waterfowl population with lesser numbers of gadwall, scaup, teal, and pintail. With refuge protection and water manipulation in the greentree reservoir, usage would be increased. Atchafalaya NWR is an important wood duck production area. Prior to the opening of a hunting season an area of the refuge will be selected and designated as sanctuary where hunting will not be permitted. This will be done in order to increase populations of these birds.

The American woodcock utilizes the upland area of the refuge for winter range. Their numbers will generate a hunting interest. The entire refuge will be open for hunting.

3. Estimated Hunter Use and Harvest

Atchafalaya NWR has traditionally received a significant amount of waterfowl hunting and harvest. More restrictive access, partial-day hunting, and blind restrictions will curtail some hunting efforts. It is estimated that 400 hunter efforts will be made for waterfowl with an estimated harvest of 600 ducks.

Hunter efforts for woodcock are estimated to be 150, with an estimated harvest of 250 birds.

4. Justification

The hunting of migratory and resident waterfowl has historically been a major activity in south Louisiana. Much of the land in south central Louisiana outside the Atchafalaya Basin has been cleared for agricultural, industrial, residential and highway development. Remaining bottomland hardwood tracts are privately owned or leased to clubs for hunting. Sherburne Wildlife Management Area, 11,780 acres, shares some common boundaries with Atchafalaya NWR, and the areas will complement each other in providing a sizable tract of bottomland hardwoods, readily accessible for public waterfowl hunting. Almost 100 per cent of the public supports hunting on this area with regulated conditions. Opening Atchafalaya NWR to waterfowl hunting and resident game hunting will gain support for the refuge, USFWS, and LDWF. It would also be in keeping with a primary objective of the refuge system: to provide high quality wildlife-oriented recreational opportunities.

Migratory bird hunting is an acceptable and desirable activity that permits the public to utilize a renewable resource, optimize public use, and perpetuates healthy viable migratory bird populations for future generations.

B. Big Game

1. Administration

White-tailed deer and turkey are the only big game species occurring on the Atchafalaya NWR that are currently listed as legal big game. Black bear do inhabit the refuge and have been legally hunted in the past. However, present population levels do not justify hunting. Species to be hunted will be published in the special refuge regulations. State regulations, USFWS policy and special refuge regulations will govern hunting.

Special permits will be required only for either sex hunts. The number of permits issued will not be limited and will be available on a first come first serve basis. Permits are needed in order to determine the extent of the harvest. The entire refuge will be open for hunting.

2. Data

Estimated deer population is in the range of one deer per 25 acres. The present refuge herd is estimated to be between 600 and 700 animals. It is estimated that under state management a population level of approximately 500 animals will be maintained. Turkey numbers are relatively low; it is estimated that approximately 50 - 60 birds are present on the refuge.

3. Estimated Hunter Use and Harvest

An estimated 4,000 hunter visits are expected during the initial deer season with minor increases until the deer herd is stabilized. A slight decline in hunter visits which will probably stabilize between 3,500 - 4,000 hunter efforts. The anticipated harvest is approximately 175 - 200 deer. An estimated 75 - 100 hunter efforts for turkey will produce 4 - 6 gobblers during the initial season. Participation and harvest could increase in subsequent years.

4. Justification

The refuge supports a high density deer herd. Private hunt clubs in the area have practiced a bucks-only harvest method for many years. Such a method allowed the deer herd to exceed the carrying capacity of the habitat, and a population heavily skewed towards female and yearling deer. Only in the recent years prior to acquisition was some harvest of antlerless deer carried out. Deer numbers have been reduced and sex ratio levels more balanced; however, they are not at optimum levels at present. It is anticipated that with either-sex hunting overall numbers will be reduced and sex ratios will be brought in balance and the overall condition of the deer herd will improve.

Refuge big game hunts would continue to provide high quality wildlife-oriented recreation, optimize the use of a renewable resource, and fulfill LDWF, USFWS and refuge objectives.

C. Upland/Small Game

1. Administration

Upland/small game found on Atchafalaya NWR includes: gray and fox squirrels, swamp rabbit, cottontail rabbit, raccoon, and opossum. Species to be hunted will be published annually in the LDWF Commission approved regulations and the special refuge regulations (50 CFR). Most data on small game will be collected through field investigations, and hunter bag checks. The entire refuge will be open to hunting.

2. Data

It is estimated that Atchafalaya NWR supports one squirrel per acre. Population level may fluctuate dramatically on an annual basis. Densities are generally dependent on the previous year's mast crop.

Rabbit populations are estimated to be one rabbit per five acres. This number could increase substantially following logging operations and cultivated field regeneration.

3. Estimated Hunter Use and Harvest

It is anticipated that all small game hunts combined will exceed 5,000 hunter efforts. Squirrel hunting is the most popular, with rabbit a distant second and in most cases incidental to squirrel hunting. There will be no night hunting for raccoon; however, licensed hunters can legally take one raccoon per day during squirrel season and no limit (daytime hunting) while trapping season is open. It is estimated that 3,000 - 3,500 squirrel and 300 - 400 rabbit will be harvested. Raccoon harvest by hunters and trappers is estimated to be approximately 350 animals. Opossum take will approximate 150 animals, mostly taken incidental to trapping or hunting other species.

4. Justification

Based on environmental conditions and population parameters, annual hunting seasons will be utilized as a management tool to ensure that healthy, viable populations of small game mammals are perpetuated.

The hunting proposal will allow utilization of a renewable resource, provide substantial outdoor recreational opportunities, and support a primary objective of Atchafalaya NWR.

D. Fur Animals

1. Administration

Fur animals found on Atchafalaya NWR include: nutria, muskrat, mink, otter, and beaver. All species will be opened to sport trapping.

A special permit will be required in order to obtain harvest data. The number of permits will not be limited, and no territories will be assigned to trappers. No fee will be assessed for permits, and no share of the hides or proceeds from their sale will be collected.

2. Data

All species present on the refuge are in numbers large enough to support a sport trapping program. Nutria and muskrat are abundant in the swamp areas of the refuge. Mink, otter and beaver range throughout the refuge, making use of the many streams and sloughs.

3. Estimated Trapper Use and Harvest

It is estimated that around 20 trappers will seek permits to trap the refuge. The number of pelts taken is expected to vary

from year to year depending on a number of things, such as the value of pelts, weather, population cycles, and water conditions.

4. Justification

Based on environmental conditions and population levels, annual trapping will be utilized as a management tool to ensure that healthy, thriving populations of fur animals are maintained.

Trappers generally confine their trapline to the streams that run through the refuge. Habitats found here for these animals (other than the streams) are difficult for trappers to reach, and for that reason the harvest is expected to remain light. It is anticipated that no quotas (or limits) will need to be set for any species listed above. However, harvest data will be analyzed annually and related to population estimates to ensure that the refuge will continue to support optimum numbers of all.

Trapping is one of the stated purposes for establishing the refuge.

E. Methods of Control and Enforcement

Check stations will be employed only for deer hunting. Their location will be made known to participating hunters each year prior to the opening of the seasons.

Enforcement will be the responsibility of the State Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. Officers will be provided to monitor the progress of the hunts, to detect and apprehend violators, and to protect the public.

F. Funding and Staffing Requirements

All requirements to be provided by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

VI. Measures Taken to Avoid Conflicts With Other Management Objectives

A. Biological Conflicts

A copy of the refuge's Section 7 Consultation covering public hunting is attached to this plan.

B. Public Use Conflicts

Until facilities are provided to the public, including better roads and access points, virtually all use made of the refuge by the public will be for hunting and fishing. There will be conflicts between the various hunts and between hunters and fishermen

and between hunters, fishermen and trappers. Most of the conflicts will be minor in nature and will not have to be addressed specifically. The most severe problem will be between deer hunters and those hunting other game. For the safety of all, hunting of other game will be restricted or halted during deer hunts, especially the either sex deer hunts.

VII. Conduct of the Hunt

A. Refuge-Specific Hunting Regulations

See attached list.

B. Anticipated Public Reaction to the Hunt

The lands now within the refuge have a long hunting and trapping history. During more recent years prior to the refuge being established hunting was largely through private lease or as a member of a hunting club. Opening of these lands to the public will be well received by an overwhelming majority of people. The adjacent Sherburne Wildlife Management Area was established and opened for public hunting a few years ago. The refuge hunts will be almost identical to Sherburne.

C. Description of Hunter Selection Process

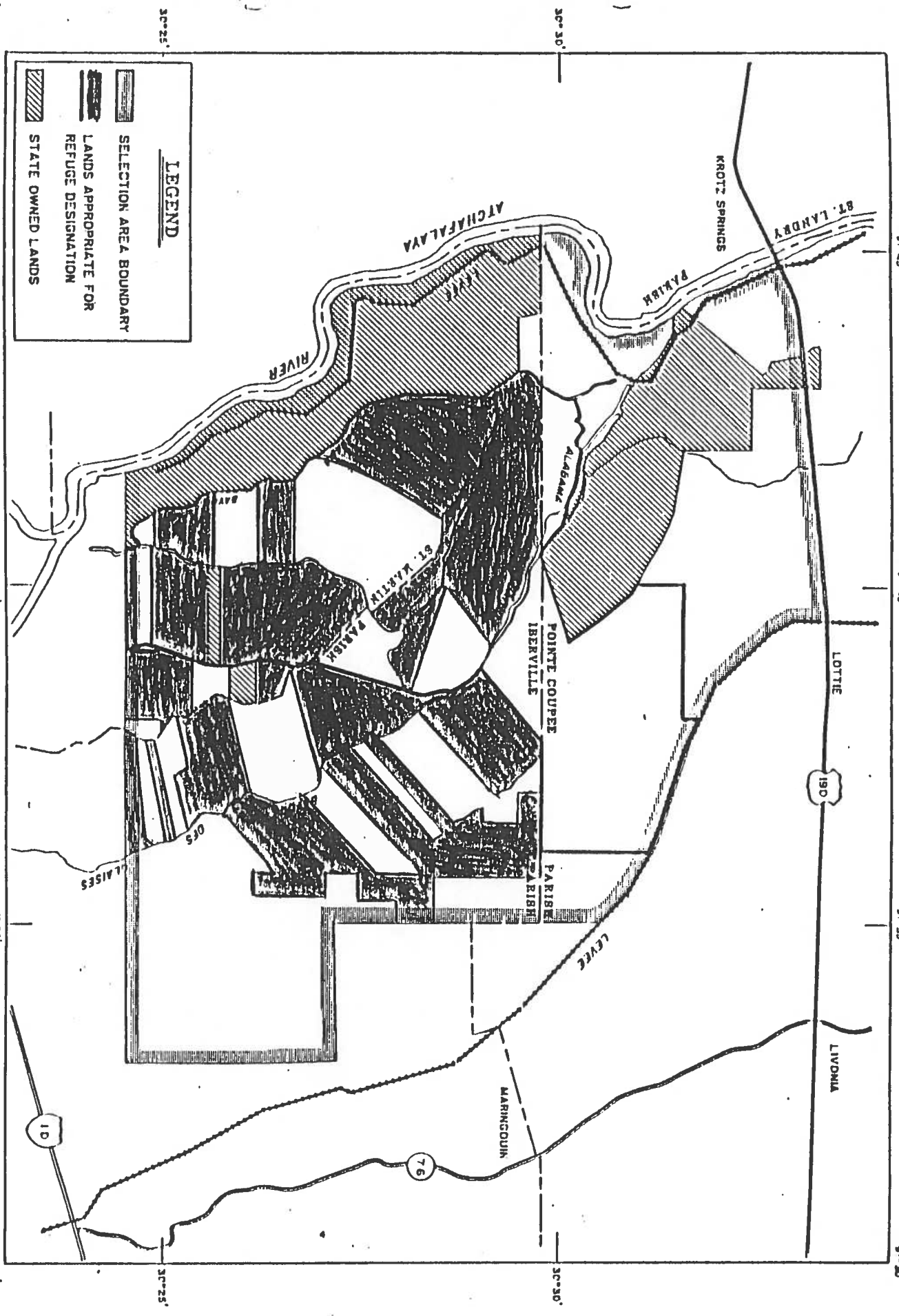
Hunts held on the refuge will not be restricted as to the number of participants. This includes those where permits are required.

D. Media Selection for Announcing and Publicizing Hunts

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries will handle publicity in the same way as other wildlife management areas it manages.

E. Hunter Requirements

All will be the same as those of the adjacent Sherburne Wildlife Management Area.



LEGEND

- SELECTION AREA BOUNDARY
- LANDS APPROPRIATE FOR REFUGE DESIGNATION
- STATE OWNED LANDS

COMPILED BY THE DIVISION OF REALTY
FROM SURVEYS BY U.S.C.S.
ATLANTA, GEORGIA MARCH 26, 1965



NORTH

Sport Hunting Decision Document Package for

Atchafalaya NWR



Contents

2. EA/FONSI

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
ATCHAFALAYA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
LOUISIANA

JANUARY 1987

FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

PROPOSED

OPENING OF ATCHAFALAYA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

TO

MIGRATORY GAME BIRD HUNTING, BIG GAME HUNTING
AND UPLAND/SMALL GAME HUNTING

ATCHAFALAYA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
IBERVILLE AND ST. MARTIN PARISHES, LOUISIANA

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I. PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

Sport hunting has been proposed for Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge as per the attached hunting plan. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (State) recognize hunting as a valid means of providing recreational opportunities, utilizing renewable resources, maintaining healthy, viable wildlife populations, and meeting refuge objectives.

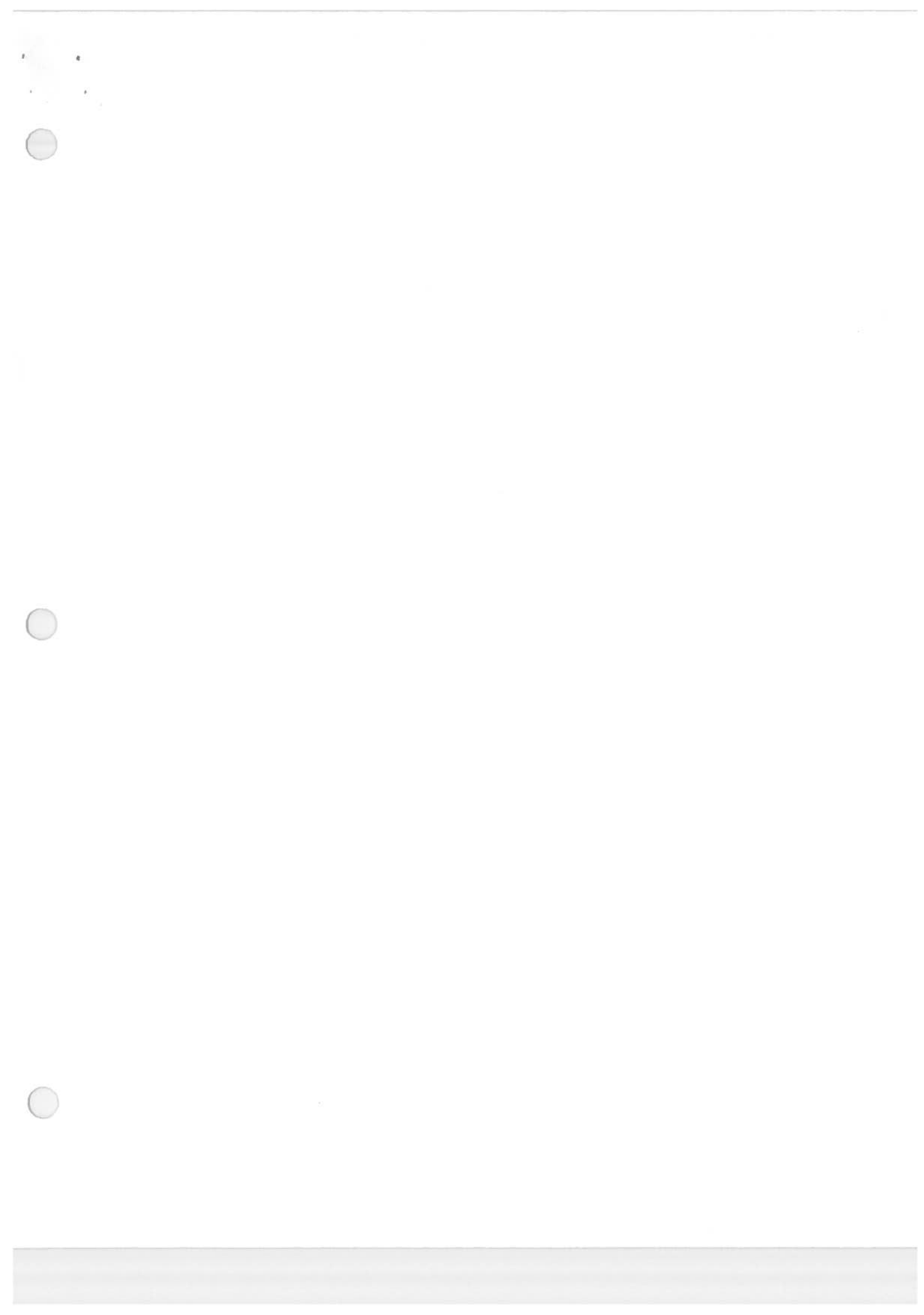
All activities on a national wildlife refuge must be compatible with the primary purposes for which the refuge was established. For Atchafalaya Refuge these purposes are:

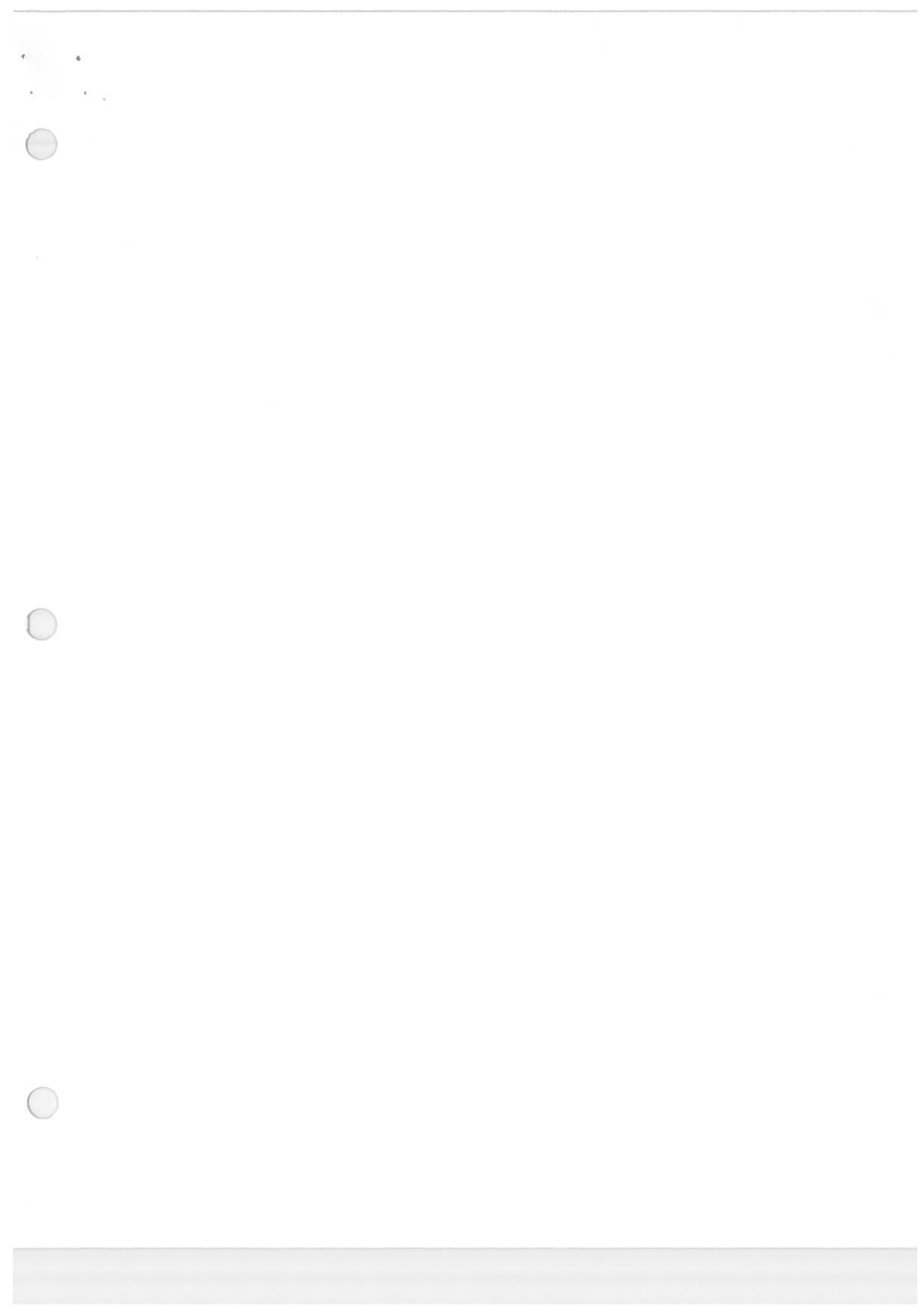
- A. to provide for conservation and management of all fish and wildlife within the refuge;
- B. to fulfill the international treaty obligations of the United States with respect to fish and wildlife; and
- C. to provide opportunities for scientific research, environmental education, and fish and wildlife-oriented recreation, including hunting, fishing and trapping, bird watching, nature photography, and others.

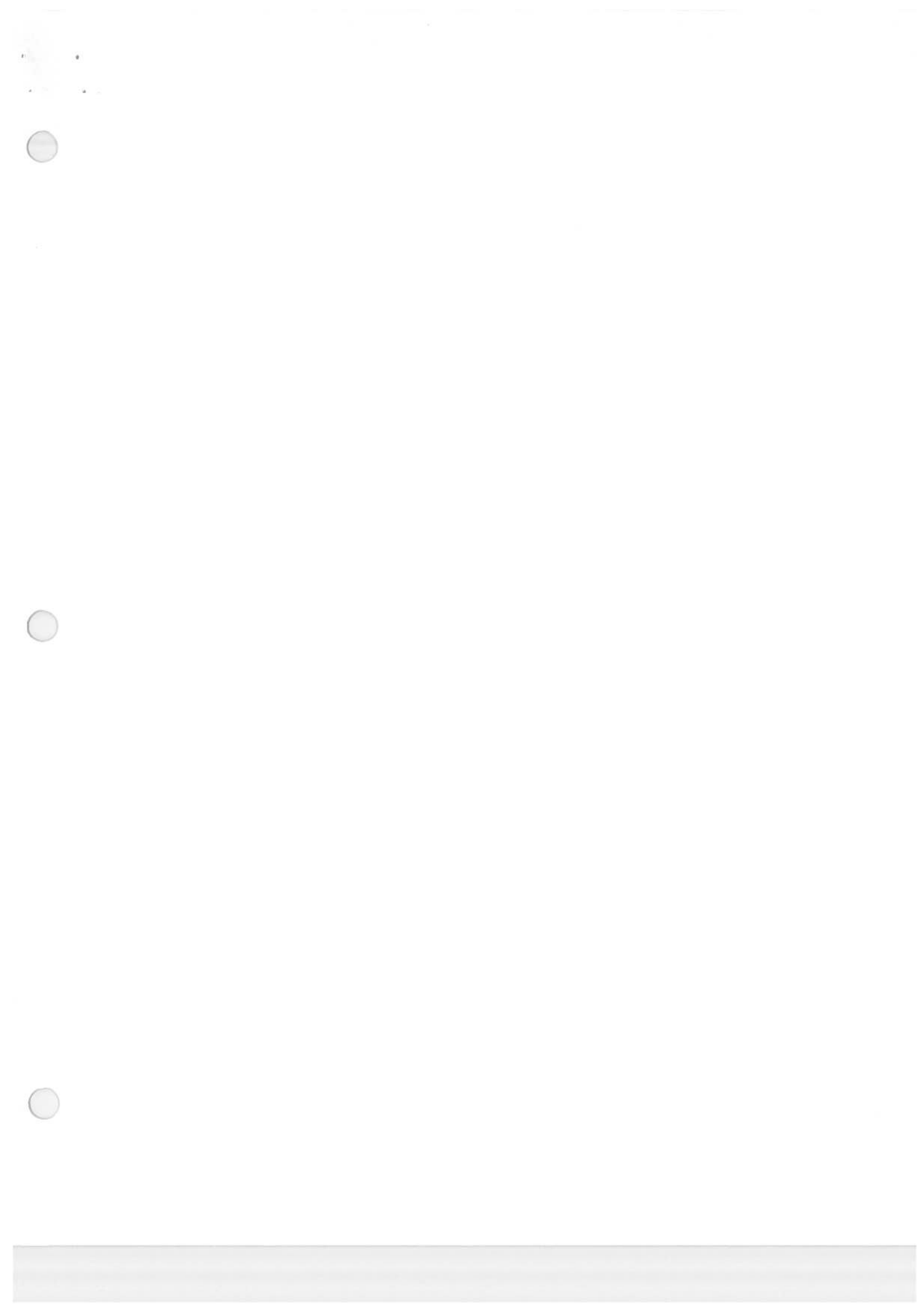
To fulfill these purposes the following objectives have been set for the refuge:

1. Wildlife: to assure the future existence and optimum populations of those vertebrate and invertebrate species that are normally found here.
2. Interpretation and Environmental Education: to enhance understanding and appreciation of the total environment including all natural resources.
3. Recreation: to provide a variety of recreational opportunities including fishing, hunting, wildlife observation, and other public use activities consistent with primary wildlife objectives.
4. Research: to provide opportunity for environmental and ecological research.

A need for continued hunting opportunities at Atchafalaya NWR is emphasized by (1) the many hunters (in-state and out-of-state) who







presently utilize the area, and (2) the expected increase in demand for hunting opportunities as our Nation's woodlands are cleared for other purposes.

II. ALTERNATIVES INCLUDING PROPOSED ACTION

To accomplish refuge objectives and respond to the needs as described in Section I, two actions were considered and analyzed:

- A. Proposed Action - open Atchafalaya NWR to sport taking of resident and migratory game species in accordance with refuge hunting plan.
- B. No Action - close Atchafalaya NWR to all sport hunting opportunities.

A description of the alternative actions is given below.

A. Proposed Action

Under this alternative, Atchafalaya NWR would open to the taking of migratory game birds, big game, and upland/small game for sport purposes in accordance with the Refuge Hunting Plan. Wildlife populations would be monitored through habitat mapping, harvest surveys, recreational use surveys, population censuses, browse surveys, etc. This information would then determine annual use, seasons and harvest within the guidelines of State regulations. Camping and vehicle use will be permitted in accordance with FWS policies. All applicable State and Federal regulations (50 CFR) will be implemented.

This is the alternative preferred by the FWS.

B. No Action

This alternative would result in maintaining Atchafalaya NWR essentially as a "wildlife sanctuary" with no provisions for the harvest of its wildlife. The FWS would prohibit the sport taking of all game species on all lands acquired in fee title.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

Atchafalaya Refuge is located within the northeast area of the Atchafalaya Basin Floodway System in Iberville and St. Martin Parishes, Louisiana. The Basin is in the south central part of the state. (See attached map.)

The environmental components that will be affected by the alternative actions are described below.

A. Habitat

The habitat within the refuge consists of mid to late successional bottomland hardwood forests, cypress-tupelo forests mixed with bottomland hardwood forests, open water, and agricultural lands.

Tree species within the bottomland hardwood forests vary according to the wetness of the specific site. Common species in the drier areas are water oak, willow oak, sweetgum and American elm. Nuttall oak, overcup oak, bitter pecan, ash and Drummond red maple occur on the wetter areas. Common understory and groundstory species present are swamp privet, water elm, poison ivy, green-brier, rattan vine, shield fern, false nettle and butterweed.

The mixed cypress-tupelo swamp forests consists of some bottomland hardwood species with cypress, tupelo, swamp red maple and pumpkin ash being present. Understory plants would include snowbell, buttonbush, Virginia willow, swamp privet and water elm. These areas are usually covered with water much of the year and serve as high quality aquatic areas.

The open water habitat within the lands primarily consists of fresh bayous which indirectly connect with the Atchafalaya River. These bayous meander through the refuge and serve as waterways for fish and other aquatic wildlife to move between the streams and swamps.

Approximately 500 acres of agricultural lands are within the refuge. Crops produced here are soybeans, corn, millo, millet and wheat.

B. Wildlife

1. Endangered Species and Species of Special Concern

Three federally listed endangered species and two threatened species may utilize the refuge for year-round or migration habitat. These are: Bald Eagle (E), Eskimo curlew (E), Arctic peregrine falcon (T), Bachman's warbler (E) and the American alligator (T - threatened by similarity of appearance). The Atchafalaya River may be within the range of the Florida panther (E) and the Red wolf (E). There are continued reports of sightings of Ivory-billed woodpeckers (E) in the upper 1/3rd of the Atchafalaya Basin. Alligators are relatively abundant on the refuge and the habitat available is probably supporting near maximum numbers.

2. Migratory Birds

Atchafalaya NWR provides excellent habitat for resident wood ducks as well as other migratory waterfowl. Although wood ducks and mallards constitute the majority of the waterfowl on this area, many other species such as gadwall, green-winged teal and pintail can be found. The Atchafalaya Basin is a major wintering area for woodcock in the United States. Other migratory game birds using the refuge in smaller numbers are snipes, rails and mourning doves. Thousands of passerine birds use the area, some are year-round residents, while others migrate.

3. Big Game

White-tailed deer, wild turkey and black bear are present on the refuge. The turkey flock has expanded its geographic range to include the northern third of the Basin since its reintroduction in the mid-1960's. Deer exist in numbers estimated to be one or more per 20 - 30 acres, and are exceeding the carrying capacity for refuge habitat. A few native Louisiana black bears were known to occur in the lower Atchafalaya Basin in the early 1960's. In the mid-1960's, the State introduced 130 bears into the northern part of the Basin in Pointe Coupee Parish. Although many of these wandered widely, some remained and have reproduced. The refuge is included in their range.

4. Upland/Small Game

The resident, upland/small game species present on the refuge include gray and fox squirrels, swamp and cottontail rabbits. Quail populations because of limited habitat are low, but the other mentioned species are abundant. Squirrel habitat within the Basin is considered to be the best in Louisiana and possibly the best in the Nation.

5. Fur Animals

Commercially-important furbearing animals have been harvested from refuge lands for many years. Those species present are: mink, muskrat, nutria, river otter, bobcat, red and gray foxes, striped skunk, beaver, raccoon, opossum and coyote. All species except red fox, striped skunk and coyote are abundant on the refuge.

6. Other Wildlife

Overall, the refuge supports a vast array of mammalian, avian, reptilian and amphibian wildlife either as residents or during annual migration.

C. Water Regime

Atchafalaya NWR is made up almost entirely of seasonally flooded woodlands which range from those almost continually under water to others seldom flooded. Refuge lands, being in the upper, eastern portion of the Basin are affected considerably by manmade alterations to the drainage system here to control flooding. The entire Basin is now a gigantic floodway with levees on both banks of the Atchafalaya River and others near the perimeter of the depression that constitutes the basin. This levee system has completely isolated former distributaries of the Atchafalaya River including the several that run through the refuge. Due to this, headwater overflow flooding has been completely eliminated. Seasonal floods now come as a result of rainfall or backwater. The latter occurs during rising river stages when river water flows around the southern end of the levee system and then northward. Normally, refuge water levels are lowest in September. They then begin a steady rise to a peak in the spring, usually April. Because the Atchafalaya River is eroding its channel in this part of the basin it is becoming increasingly difficult for refuge lands to flood.

D. Present Recreational Use

The area is presently used for hunting, trapping, fishing, camping, off-road vehicle riding and wildlife observation. This is carried on by outdoor enthusiasts from throughout the state as well as those from surrounding states.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

This section provides the analytical and scientific basis for the selection of the proposed action as the preferred alternative.

A. Proposed Action (Preferred Alternative)

If this alternative is selected, resident and migratory game animals will be harvested at levels sufficient to provide the maximum recreational use and still maintain healthy, viable wildlife populations. In this manner, renewable wildlife resources would be utilized to the benefit of the public, and yet have no detrimental effects on resources.

Sport hunting and trapping on the Atchafalaya NWR would be in accordance with State, Federal and special refuge regulations, and FWS policy and directives. In general, State regulations will provide the guidelines for wildlife harvests. Special refuge regulations may be more restrictive than State regulations as deemed necessary to meet refuge objectives.

No increase in physical habitat degradation or disturbance to the human environment would occur as a result of the proposed action. Administration of the public hunting program is considered compatible with other refuge objectives. The various other activities that occur such as birding and photography are not expected to conflict to any significant degree.

Increased harassment and intentional shooting of alligators and bald eagles may occur as a result of the proposed action. However, alligators are dormant through most of the hunting seasons, and law enforcement efforts are expected to reduce the threats to eagles. Also, firearms would be prohibited from the refuge except during the hunting seasons. The use of baited leg-hold traps set for fur animals may result in bald eagles being caught. Should this occur bait trapping would have to be modified or eliminated.

The potential for wildfires will decrease due to the reduced number of campfires and the elimination of permanent camps.

This alternative would require the most energy, manpower and funding. However, it would also channel more revenue into the local communities by increasing the demand for materials and supplies by refuge users.

B. No Action

If this alternative is selected, public use in the form of sport hunting will be eliminated in an area where hunting has always occurred. Wildlife population levels would not be regulated through administered harvests; this renewable resource would not be optimally used, and the recreational use of these public lands, one of the purposes in establishing the refuge, would not be fulfilled.

Most game species of wildlife on areas that are hunted, on average, exist at higher levels than those where hunting is not permitted. Populations of animals not regulated through hunting tend to fluctuate more radically through peaks and valleys. Those not hunted or influenced by natural predation suffer even more severe fluctuations.

The non-hunting alternative would result in wildlife populations controlled by the natural environment instead of by management and would seldom be optimum for the habitat.

The endangered species present on the refuge would be more protected under this alternative, although the possibility of disturbance from other public uses would still exist.

The hazard from campfires and warming fires would be eliminated, though the possibility of woodland arson could result from disgruntled hunters denied access to lands they had traditionally used.

This alternative would result in the least energy, manpower and funding requirements. However, it would offer no increased revenue to the surrounding local communities.

V. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

This environmental assessment has received input from FWS as well as State personnel.

VI. LIST OF PREPARERS

Bobby W. Brown, Manager, Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge

LITERATURE CITED

J. L. vanBeek, et al 1977
Plan and Concept for Multi-Use Management of the Atchafalaya Basin.
Prepared for U. S. Environmental Protection Agency Report # EPA
600/3-77-062

Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, 1987
Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge Hunting Plan. 10pp.

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Refuge Manual

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1981
Atchafalaya Basin (Water and Land Resources), Louisiana Study. 71pp.

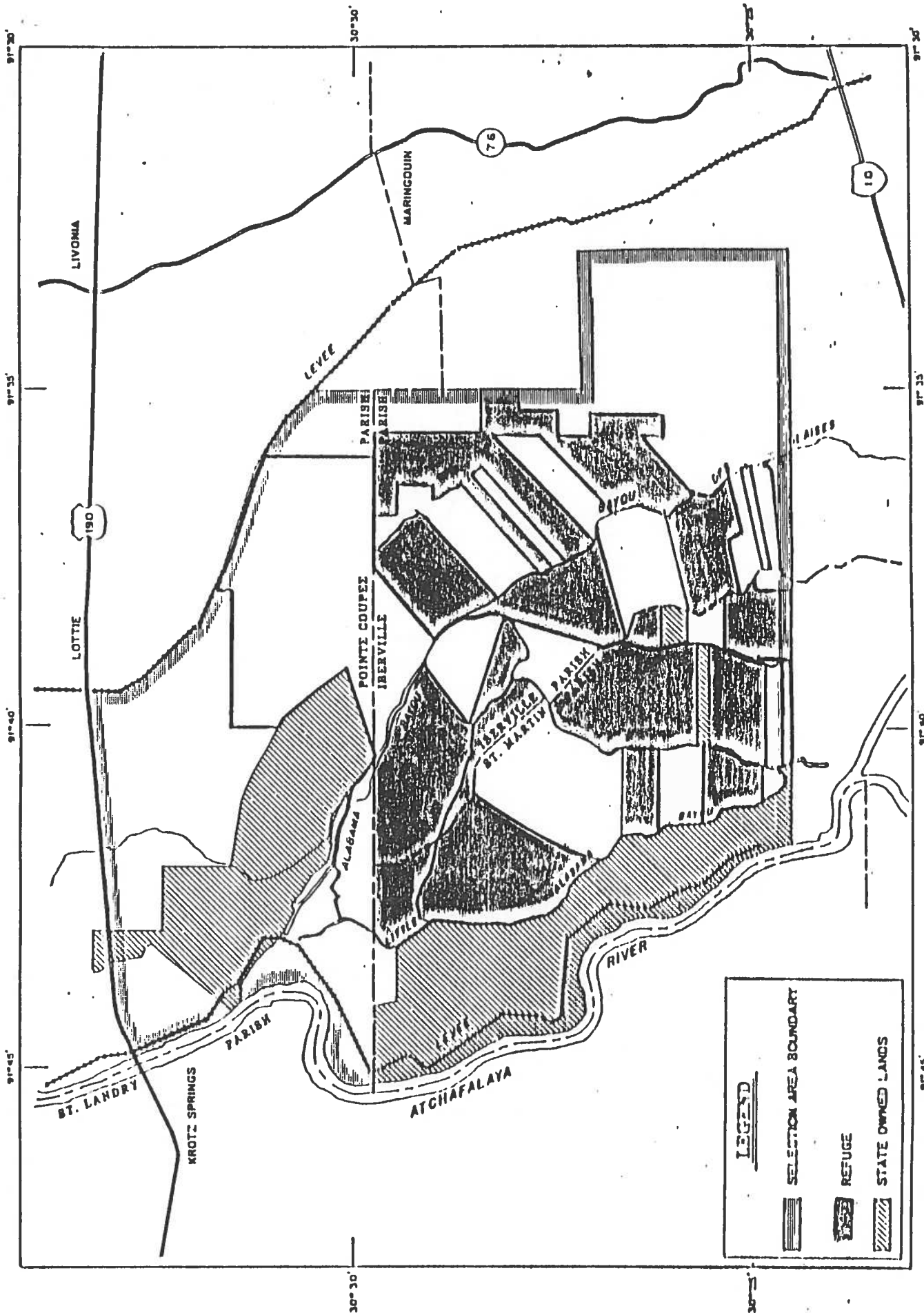
U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1985
Land Protection Plan for Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge. 12pp.

ATCHAFALAYA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

IBERVILLE, PT. COUPEE AND ST. MARTIN PARISHES, LOUISIANA

UNITED STATES
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE



COMPILED BY THE DIVISION OF REALTY
FROM SURVEYS BY U.S.G.S.

ATLANTA, GEORGIA MARCH 20, 1965

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
FOR
OPENING ATCHAFALAYA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
TO MIGRATORY BIRDS, BIG GAME AND UPLAND GAME HUNTING
ATCHAFALAYA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
LOUISIANA

I have determined that the proposed opening to hunting migratory birds, big game and upland game of Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge, Louisiana, will not have a significant effect on the human environment within the meaning of Section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. Accordingly, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

This determination is based on the following reasons:

1. The proposed hunting of migratory birds, big game and upland game species does not constitute a major Federal action and does not differ significantly from existing hunting practices on the area.
2. The proposed action is compatible with and reinforces the objectives for which Atchafalaya NWR was established.
3. The human element of the environment will not be significantly affected by implementing the proposed action which is wildlife management.
4. The proposed action will provide substantial, high quality wildlife-oriented public use.
5. The proposed action will allow the public to utilize a renewable natural resource effectively.
6. The managed hunts will ensure that game populations are maintained within the carrying capacity of the available habitat.

Supporting References:

1. Environmental Assessment (attached).
2. Section 7 Evaluation (attached).
3. Hunting Plan (attached).

4. Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge Land Acquisition Planning Report, 1985 (on file in the Atlanta Regional Office)
5. Final Environmental Impact Statement - Operation of the National Wildlife Refuge System, 1976. (On file in the Atlanta Regional Office)

01/26/87
Date


Regional Director

Attachments

Sport Hunting Decision Document Package for

Atchafalaya NWR



Contents

3. Section 7 Evaluation

SECTION 7 EVALUATION

REGION: 4

PROGRAM: Interpretation and Recreation

LOCATION (ATTACHED MAP): Atchafalaya NWR, Iberville and St. Martin
Parishes, Louisiana

LISTED SPECIES OR CRITICAL HABITATS CONSIDERED: Bald Eagle, Red Wolf,
Ivory-Billed Woodpecker,
Florida Panther and
American Alligator

NAME AND DESCRIPTION OF ACTION:

Migratory Game Birds, Big Game, and Upland Game Hunting

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes to open Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge to migratory game birds, big game and upland game hunting and to sport trapping of fur animals. All hunts will be in accordance with State, Federal and special refuge regulations (50 CFR) and FWS policies and directives. For more detailed information see Atchafalaya NWR Hunting Plan and Environmental Assessment. The proposed Special Regulations for the first year and a map are attached.

OBJECTIVES OF THE ACTION:

The objectives of the proposed action include the following:

- Compatible with all and accomplish some of the primary objectives,
- Increase endangered species protection as compared to pre-refuge conditions,
- Perpetuate healthy, viable wildlife populations for future generations,
- Optimize public utilization of a renewable resource and
- Provide for substantial, high quality wildlife-oriented recreational opportunities.

EXPLANATION OF IMPACT OF ACTION ON LISTED SPECIES OR CRITICAL HABITAT:

Bald Eagles

Sightings of bald eagles have been infrequent on lands now within the refuge. Two immatures along with one adult were reported to have been

seen in the spring of 1979 several miles to the south of the refuge. These are the last reported sightings. In all probability bald eagles are now infrequent visitors to the area during winter months. However, use during the remainder of the year cannot be discounted. Refuge habitat is of considerable value to them.

In general, implementation of the proposed refuge hunting program represents a significant increase in endangered species protection as compared to pre-refuge days.

Increased harassment and intentional shooting, as well as inadvertent trapping of bald eagles may occur, to the extent of their presence, as a result of the proposed action. However, law enforcement efforts are expected to reduce the threat. Firearms will be prohibited from the refuge during non-hunting periods. Trapping will be regulated through permits and corrective action taken if eagles are caught.

Bald eagles are expected to occur on and in the vicinity of the refuge during the period of October through mid-March. Eagles tend to follow large concentrations of waterfowl. The refuge does not now attract concentrations comparable to adjacent marsh and wetland areas. Encounters between hunters and eagles are expected to be minimal. This will be due to the low numbers of eagles present, their wariness of people and their preference for open water or fields outside the concentrated hunting areas of dense bottomland hardwoods.

Red Wolf

The Atchafalaya Basin was considered to be part of the range of the red wolf at one time. There are no recorded sightings on or near the lands now part of the refuge. The species is believed to no longer occupy any of its former range, except for certain areas where transplant attempts are being made.

Ivory-Billed Woodpecker

There have been no confirmed sightings of the ivory-billed woodpecker in several decades anywhere in the United States. There are continuing reports that they still exist in the Basin. Since 1971, numerous unconfirmed sightings of the species have been reported from the mature bottomland hardwood forest region in the northern third of the Basin east of the Atchafalaya River. This area includes the refuge. Ornithologists at Louisiana State University consider the reports as reliable.

Since there have been no confirmed sightings of this bird since the 1940's it is unlikely that it still exists in the United States. A sizable portion of the refuge is very difficult to traverse so there is the chance that it may possibly still be found. If one were encountered in these barely accessible areas it would most probably be by a hunter. With proper orientation on what to look for hunters may be of help in finding the bird.

Florida Panther

There have been no known sightings of this animal in the Basin. However, during a flood in 1973 a cougar was supposedly observed and heard by several people on a high ridge near Butte la Rose, some 25 miles south of the refuge. The refuge would probably offer good habitat for this animal. If one were encountered by a hunter it would most likely be shot, so this action may result in that happening. At this point however, it is just speculation that the animal may be here. Any reports of sightings by hunters would lend support and possibly help establish its presence.

American Alligator

Alligators exist in very low numbers in the northern portion of the Basin. Those north of Highway 190, just a few miles north of the refuge, are still listed as endangered. Refuge alligators are listed as threatened by similarity of appearance and can be harvested. Although the refuge population is low they probably exist in numbers at about what the habitat can support.

Hunting and trapping proposed by this action may result in indiscriminate killing of a few animals. However, better enforcement and controlled hunting could reduce the numbers lost as compared to those of pre-refuge times. It is likely that a limited harvest of the refuge population is warranted to make use of animals that would otherwise be lost through natural mortality.

CONCLUSIONS (CROSS OUT ONE):

- A. May Affect
- B. Will Not Affect

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the proposed action be implemented on the Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge in accordance with the attached Hunting Plan, Environmental Assessment, and Special Refuge Regulations. If conflicts arise, the necessary modifications to the hunting program will be made to benefit endangered species.

Prior to the hunting season, adequate public notice should be given via the news media and other means informing the public of the protected status of the above, listed endangered species.

ARD, WR _____

Date _____

SECTION 7 EVALUATION

PAGE 2

PROJECT LEADER Beth Wilson DATE 1-2/87

COMMENTS:

WILL NOT AFFECT: X MAY AFFECT: _____ENDANGERED SPECIES SUPERVISOR: Donna B. Jordan DATE 1-8-87

COMMENTS:

WILL NOT AFFECT: X MAY AFFECT: _____ARD- Phillip S. Morgan DATE 1/26/87

COMMENTS:

WILL NOT AFFECT: _____ MAY AFFECT: _____

ARD-FA _____ DATE _____

COMMENTS:

WILL NOT AFFECT: _____ MAY AFFECT: _____

REGIONAL DIRECTOR James M. Quinn DATE 01/26/87

COMMENTS:

WILL NOT AFFECT: X BIOLOGICAL OPINION: _____

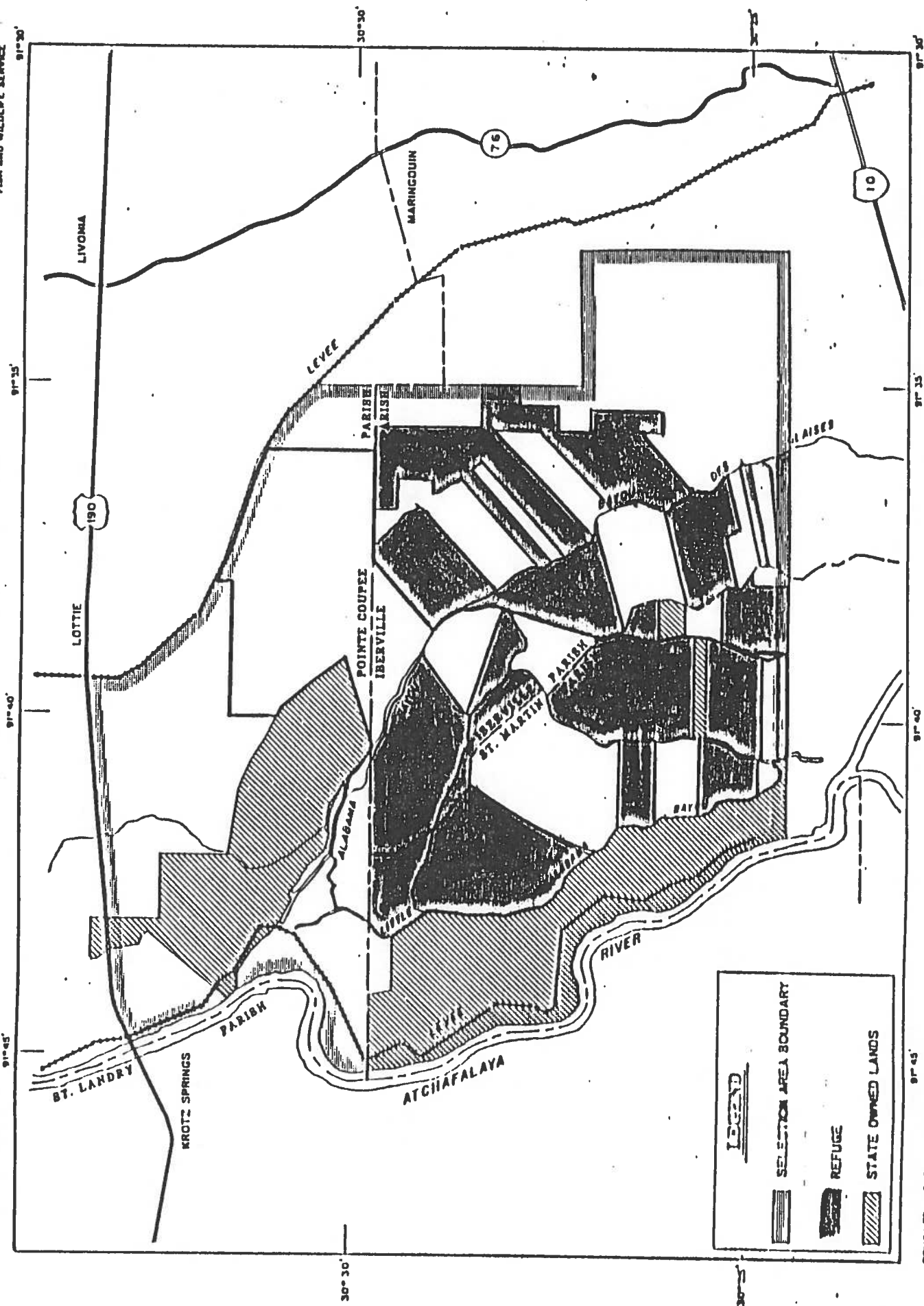
REVISED: 4/83

ATCHAFALAYA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

UNITED STATES
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

IBERVILLE, PT. COUPEE AND ST. MARTIN PARISHES, LOUISIANA



LEGEND

SELECTION AREA BOUNDARY

REFUGE

STATE OWNED LANDS

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